



Center for LEARNING CONNECTIONS

Creating Successful Futures

WorkFirst Observations and Comments

A follow-up to comments from Cal Crow and Morgan Zantua, Center for Learning Connections, presented to the WorkFirst Reexamination Workgroup on July 25, 2005.

Much of the discussion about WorkFirst and other government programs focuses mainly on the **system's** activities and actions; on what **this** agency does, and on **that** agency's role, and on how customers move through the system. This is important. We have found it equally important to focus on how customers **experience** the system, i.e., to what degree are they **engaged** in what they are asked to do? How do they feel about it? What does it mean to them? We recommend that these questions be addressed as an integral part of the WorkFirst system.

Most individuals who have found success in the workplace have a **worker identity**. Work is an integral part of who they are. Many TANF customers have no such identity. Staff members report regularly that their customers have welfare identities, entitlement identities, victim identities and "work the system" identities. Many of these customers enter the workplace without ever identifying themselves as workers. Because being a worker is of little importance to their sense of self, they have no reason to work. There is nothing in it for them. We recommend that helping customers acquire a worker identity be a fundamental part of the WorkFirst experience.

WorkFirst staff report that they often work much harder than customers. Because of the role that "numbers" play in WorkFirst, staff feel a responsibility to "push things through" and "make things happen." Self-sufficiency becomes more important to staff than to the customers themselves. When this occurs, **customer investment and involvement are minimized**. We recommend that from the beginning, customers clearly understand that the ball is in their court; that they have the strengths, skills and talents to become self-sufficient; and that staff is committed to helping them identify and maximize those attributes. If customers understand how they can use their strengths, skills, and talents to take charge of their lives, self-sufficiency will become more real to them.

WorkFirst is by nature **problem-focused**. "What are the barriers to employment?" "Why are customers not participating?" "What can we do to increase our numbers?" A growing number of organizational and psychological leaders are discovering that focusing on problems actually increases their potency, and generates more of them. They also are learning that focusing on what is working, and generating more of it, is more

likely to produce sought after results. We recommend that WorkFirst be based on helping customers identify what is already working for them, and on using their strengths, skills, talents to generate more of these positive situations.

We believe that the success of WorkFirst will depend less on policies, procedures and customer flow than on how customers experience and feel about the system. We know for example that people who are angry have a tendency to lash out or attack, and those who are fearful want to escape. This “fight or flight” response is typical of many WorkFirst customers who view the system as a set of rules, regulations and sanctions, i.e., as a place where they “lose.”

On the other hand, if they could view WorkFirst as an opportunity to identify and develop their strengths, skills and talents; and as a vehicle for improving the lives of their children, they are much more likely to participate and create a “better life” for themselves.

Writing in the July-August 2003 edition of American Scientist, Barbara Fredrickson cites twenty years of research showing that “when people feel good, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible and open to information.” (p. 333) Positive emotions broaden our mindsets, allowing us to be creative and to consider new opportunities. They make it possible for us to have a “futures orientation.” Negative emotions have the opposite effect. They narrow our mindsets, limiting the number of responses available to us. Our focus is on surviving “here and now.” We dig in, holding on to what we have, because we can’t imagine anything better.

Numerous studies tell us that WorkFirst customers want to be successful. They want to be “good parents” and would rather not be on public assistance. This desire for success should be acknowledged and nurtured from the moment a customer encounters the system. This will require a thorough re-evaluation of the WorkFirst orientation, of the IRP, and of how staff members throughout the system interact with customers.

We recommend that the workgroup consider these questions: What can be done **systemically** 1) to help customers acquire the positive emotions necessary for their future success? 2) to ensure that WorkFirst staff **at all levels** have the knowledge and skills necessary to reinforce and build on these positive emotions?